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TITLE PAGE

**A PRACTITIONER CONCEPT OF CONTEMPORARY CREATIVITY**

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## **Abstract**

This article reviews conceptualisations from three academic areas: the sociology of art, the psychology of creativity, and research on the cultural and creative industries. These are compared with findings from a critical discursive study with UK practitioners. The meanings and associations these 'maker artists' attach to creativity are discussed as a 'practitioner concept'. For the practitioners, the association of creativity with art carries a promise of transcendence and escape from ordinary life, but also a potential challenge to their own entitlement and claims to a creative status. The article shows, first, that the academic areas utilise different and conflicting conceptualisations and, second, that the practitioner concept is not consistent with any one of these. The article argues that the contemporary celebration of creativity is based on different meanings and unacknowledged conflicts. The article proposes that future social psychological research on creativity requires a more critical approach to the concept.

## **Keywords**

practitioner concept, creativity, critical discursive psychology, maker-artist

## **INTRODUCTION**

Creativity is widely celebrated and discussed in contemporary Western societies, as a focus of academia, education and policy. The cultural sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2017) suggests that creativity is embraced as both an aspiration and an injunction: 'We *want* to be creative and we *ought* to be creative' (p.2). However, a review of three academic areas indicates significant differences in their assumptions about people's capacity to be creative, the basis of creative value and the status of creativity as a distinct and observable phenomenon.

This article compares the academic conceptualisations with the understanding of creativity that underpins practitioners' accounts of themselves and their work. The 'practitioner concept' is investigated through a critical discursive analysis of interviews with UK 'maker artists'. The analysis shows that the practitioner concept is not identical to any one of the academic conceptualisations, although there are some parallel assumptions. For the practitioners, the association of creativity with the elite arts carries a promise of transcendence and escape from ordinary life, but also a potential challenge to their own entitlement and claims to a creative status.

The review and analysis raise questions about the distinctiveness of the creative, the promise that is implicit in its contemporary celebration and how far this is achievable for creative practitioners. More broadly, the article suggests that academic researchers have not attended sufficiently to differences in how creativity is conceptualised, including the meanings that creativity carries for practitioners themselves. The article proposes that future social psychological research requires a more critical approach to the concept of creativity.

## **BACKGROUND**

### ***Creativity in Three Academic Areas***

Academic accounts of creativity can be loosely categorised according to disciplines and their corresponding foci or projects. The humanities tend to study creative products or outputs, sociology explores the social organization associated with creativity, including institutions and occupations, and psychology and business studies share a concern with the modelling of creativity and creative processes, to facilitate practical applications. However, that categorisation omits connections between disciplines, and some influential interdisciplinary

work. This section explores the conceptualisations of creativity in three broad academic areas: the sociology of art, the psychology of creativity, and recent research on the global sector of the cultural and creative industries (CCI). The section reviews differences, and connections, between the conceptualisations.

The association of creativity with the arts, and particularly elite 'high arts' like painting and sculpture, carries positive connotations, for instance, of culture and civilisation. A leading CCI academic suggests that "Since the Renaissance - and especially since the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century - there has been a widespread tendency to think of 'art' as being one of the highest forms of human creativity (Hesmondhalgh 2007)". In a classic sociological study of the social institutions, practices and meanings of art, Howard S. Becker (1982) summarises what he calls, critically, the 'myth of the artist':

'Both participants in the creation of art works and members of society generally believe that the making of art requires special talents, gifts, or abilities, which few have.' (Becker 1982:14).

This image is not, of course, presented as a factual description. Becker's interest was in the social processes and 'art worlds' which sustain art in Western societies. The myth is significant as a 'historical imaginary' (Gerber 2017:28) of creative lives and work, perpetuating recognisable associations of art, an artistic life and therefore artistic creativity.

Becker suggests that another aspect of the myth is the artist's freedom to 'violate rules of decorum, propriety, and common sense everyone else must follow or risk being punished' (14). This violation follows from the elevation of the artistic vocation over more conventional priorities like earning a living and supporting dependents. Art becomes an end in itself, transcending ordinary life and its pressures to conform. The myth can be expanded to extend this specialness to the artist's lifestyle, particularly invoking a 19<sup>th</sup> century

European artist (White and White 1965/1993). He lives in poverty, outside conventional society, probably in a European city like Paris. He pursues his vocation, following inspiration and struggling to achieve artistic fulfilment through his art. Other rewards, like recognition and riches, may be postponed indefinitely and only come posthumously. The pronouns are intentional because this is a masculine image (Bain 2004). It also largely excludes non-Western art.

The image is said to have stimulated mid-twentieth century developments in the psychology of creativity. Sarah Brouillette (2013) argues that in the post-war period, creativity was seen as necessary for the USA's economic development. Future industries were expected to require innovators and the image of the artist informed an ideal of a new worker as a creative non-conformist who could live with uncertainty. Somewhat differently, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2014) suggests that the prompting came from the US Air Force who wanted a creativity test for prospective pilots, to reduce errors caused by uncreative 'by the book' responses to emergencies. A historian of science, Jamie Cohen-Cole (2009), proposes that the aspects of the image became associated with the American national interest. He argues that the post-war political threats of authoritarianism and Communism were both associated with conformity, rigidity, a lack of autonomy and people's failure to think for themselves. In contrast, an American style and way of life were assumed to be characterised by freedom of thought and diversity. Creativity was seen as an aspect of an 'open, autonomous mind' and also 'democratic character' (237). The creative individual therefore came to be seen as the protector of American values, again on the implicit analogy with the non-conformist artist.

Psychologists suggest that creativity is a capacity or potential which is possessed by everyone, at least to some degree. Abraham Maslow (1962) links it to the 'self-actualisation'

at the top of the human 'hierarchy of needs'. Csikszentmihalyi (2002) connects creativity to the 'optimal' or 'flow' experience which all people aspire to. Csikszentmihalyi's systems approach shifts the focus from the creative individual to a creative process in which three 'systems' act on each other. The first is the person who creates something new, like an idea, the second the cultural context or 'domain' of knowledge and conventions to which that new idea might contribute (for example, by solving to a problem), and the third the social 'field' of relevant people who can assess the new idea, pass it on, for example, through teaching, and generally define the domain.

In the arts, the person would be the artist or practitioner, the domain the specific area of creative practice, including the earlier work that informs it, and the field the community or network of audiences, critics, dealers and academic experts corresponding broadly to the 'art world' described by Becker<sup>1</sup>. Becker's emphasis on social worlds is taken up in sociological systems approaches (e.g. Burns, Machado and Corte 2015, Parker and Corte 2017) which emphasise the social embeddedness of creative processes. Such an approach takes account of collective actors and social structures and institutions. There is a greater emphasis on the creative output attaining social acceptance (p.194fn). Sawyer (2003) distinguishes the filtering and selection which occurs in the creative interaction of a group ('synchronic'), from 'the longer term, diachronic interaction characteristic of scientific and artistic creativity' (124). Burns et al (2015) also reduce the focus on application because their approach does not require or assume that an innovation will be 'useful, adaptive, valuable, [or] appropriate' (p.182).

These theorists, and others, have stimulated an enormous amount of psychological research, for instance, to 'describe and model' the process and 'enhance creativity through process training' (Lubart 2018). As Brouillette (2013) indicates, psychology has been

particularly concerned with the practical applications of creativity. It is assumed to have utility in a broad, even mundane range of activities, from chess playing (Amabile 1983) to business and management. (Of course, the arts themselves can be argued to have practical uses, for instance, as markers of wealth and power, but these tend not to be included in the myth of the artist.) Following the systems approach, some psychologists have looked at creative groups. Keith Sawyer (2003, 2007) used jazz bands and drama companies as models for workplace teams that develop new products. Socio-cultural psychologists propose that creativity arises in collaborative relationships, like literary and scientific partnerships (John-Steiner 2000; see also Glaveanu and Tanggaard 2014). Psychology has therefore challenged the conceptualisation of creativity as a special or elite quality, possessed only by artists and a few other genius-type individuals. Creativity becomes a near-universal capacity arising in complex contexts and valued not as an end in itself ('art for art's sake'), but for its practical applications, particularly in the workplace.

The supposed utility of creativity underpinned the identification of the cultural and creative industries (CCI) (Hesmondhalgh 2007, O'Connor 2010). Definitions of the CCI are varied, and fluid. An influential British government account lists the creative industries as conventionally 'artistic' areas ('architecture, the art and antiques markets, crafts, design...music, the performing arts') but also 'interactive leisure software, ...software and computer services, television and radio' (DCMS 2001). The common feature of the industries in the sector is supposedly that wealth is generated through the 'individual creativity, skill and talent' of their workers (DCMS 2001). Creativity subsequently became linked to 'virtually all the performative labours producing the information economy, from computer coding to legal research' (Fuller et al 2013:144). Moreover, creative practitioners came to be seen as drivers of urban regeneration, after the arrival of artists and musicians apparently



initiated the gentrification of depressed industrial areas in New York and Manchester in the 1980s (O'Connor 2010). This led to the now common practice of local or national governments building a new art gallery or cultural centre in order to stimulate a local economy<sup>2</sup>.

Within contemporary organisations, creativity is valued for contributing to the future-focussed adaptation associated with neoliberalism (Adkins and Jokinen 2008). In addition, creativity and its supposed rewards are associated with self-employment in almost any occupation (Taylor 2015a). There are obvious overlaps between the images of the creative worker and the entrepreneur (Ahl 2006, Brockling 2016) as individuals who can develop new projects and monetise their creativity. The entrepreneur is more strongly associated with business success, whereas the creative worker, on the analogy with the artist, accepts precarity, enduring uncertain earnings and postponed reward (Gill and Pratt 2008) out of 'love of the work'.<sup>3</sup> As career trajectories have become less predictable (Sennett 1998), employment less secure (DBEI 2017) and potential has acquired a greater value than experience (Adkins and Jokinen 2008), the image of the artist again informs an ideal of the contemporary worker, as it did in the mid-twentieth century period discussed by Brouillette.

The CCI sector therefore brings together conceptualisations of creativity from both psychology and the arts. The expectation that creativity has practical applications and can be monetised is informed by the psychology of creativity. The positive image of creative working and an associated lifestyle derives from the elite arts. For practitioners themselves, the myth of the artist outlined by Becker persists as an attraction (McRobbie 2016). Andreas Reckwitz (2017) argues that creativity provides a motivation for contemporary workers that was previously excluded. He suggests that in the modernist period, there was an emphasis

on rationality and purpose which reduced workers to passive information processors. In contrast, in our new aestheticized society, people have become active creative subjects, seeking 'fascination and satisfaction' and 'stimuli and excitement' from their work (11).

### ***Conflicting Conceptualisations of Creativity***

There is some overlap in how creativity is understood in the three academic areas which have been reviewed, in part because one has informed another. However, there are also significant differences and even conflicts in their conceptualisations of creativity. One point of difference concerns people's capacity to be creative. The myth of the artist implies that a special talent is required. Although the sociology of art has largely avoided debate about whether such a talent actually exists (see Banks 2017, Born 2010, discussed below), the assumption is considered significant: creativity retains the mystique deriving from the myth of the artist as a person with special gifts. In contrast, psychology democratises creativity, approaching it as a normal human capacity or potential that can be modelled and fostered (Caroff and Lubart 2012). For creative practitioners, this issue of capacity potentially relates to their own claims to be creative. It is an interesting paradox that psychologists tend to introduce their research on creativity with references to elite individuals and practices<sup>4</sup>, invoking the specialness which they are simultaneously countering.

A related issue concerns the status of creativity. It is variously conceptualised as an observable, even measurable phenomenon, and as an attribution which is powerful principally because of the (possibly false) promise it carries. Becker's sociology of art does not attempt to pin down the artistic or the creative as separable from its social contexts. His focus is on the social conditions which contribute to the ascription of creativity, that is, the relationships and circumstances which facilitate, or obstruct, the categorisation of some

practitioners, practices and outputs as belonging to art worlds. In contrast, psychology largely assumes that creativity can be identified and studied, in practices or practitioners or both. The original identification of the CCI as a sector (e.g. DCMS 2001) similarly rested on the idea of creativity as a phenomenon that can be cultivated, and monetised. The issue of whether creativity has a status beyond its 'imagined' (Anderson 1983) and attributed aspects is potentially relevant for practitioners, because it raises the further question of whether those who aspire to creative practice and creative lives are pursuing attainable objectives.

Relatedly, there are different assumptions about creative value. CCI researchers have been challenged for failing to take account of creative value in the sense of aesthetic quality (Born 2010). One question is whether a sociological account can accommodate the distinctiveness of 'good' creative work (Banks 2017), as a quality that is supposedly independent of context. Critics of the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and others, on the power of design museums and art galleries, argue that creative practices and outputs have a value that is 'in excess of that ascribed to them either as social facts or as commodities' (Banks 2017:31). Value is also an issue for academics concerned with the self-exploitation of workers in the CCI. The question here is whether there is some special value and experience of fulfilment in the ever-expanding range of supposedly creative occupations and activities (McRobbie 2002: 517). In addition, for creative workers and practitioners themselves, value is relevant to external recognition and also their personal judgements of their practice, for instance, in decisions about the point at which a creative output is finished, and whether the creative work has been successful.

A further issue raised by the different academic conceptualisations concerns the relation, if any, between creative and monetary value. Although accounts of the CCI,

especially by policy-makers, have emphasised the economic value of the creative, there is also a well-established idea that monetary value and creative value are not connected. An extreme version is the assumption that poverty is an inevitable and even essential aspect of the artistic life: the artist in the garret who is unable to sell his work may later be recognised as a genius. Hesmondhalgh (2007) criticises this opposition of creativity and commerce but also notes its continuing effects in the CCI, for example because it 'adds to the uncertainty and difficulty of the environment in which cultural businesses work' (Hesmondhalgh 2007: 20). For practitioners, the question of value relates to motivation: is the creative practitioner working to earn, like a conventional worker, or to achieve some higher fulfilment and self-actualisation?

Economic sociologists suggest that the relationship between economic and creative value is complex. Olav Velthuis (2003) argues that in art markets pricing operates as 'a semiotic communicative system akin to language' (184). Prices can signal creative value and the status of the artist. They can be manipulated to protect the self-esteem of artists and collectors: 'people find ways of communicating non-economic values via the economic medium of price' (207). Alison Gerber (2017) also discusses the economic and the artistic or creative as interlinked. The US artists she interviewed present 'narratives of investment' (7) in order to 'account for the value of the things that they do', for instance, in terms of the time, money, effort and choices involved, and other opportunities foregone. She suggests such accounting is required because 'everyone expects returns on their resource commitment' (33). Her analysis found that the artists vary the justification at different times for different purposes. Gerber argues that 'instrumental' accounts position the speaker as a rational economic actor, seeking to maximise profit, or some other economic advantage, such as employment opportunities. In contrast, 'evaluative' accounts offer non-economic

justifications, such as the creative rewards of working as an artist. Gerber found in her participants' talk an emphasis on 'loving' the work similar to that noted by CCI researchers (e.g. Taylor and Littleton 2012). She also found a moral justification that art benefits society, again paralleling findings from research on the CCI (Banks 2007).

The differences and contradictions in academic conceptualisations of creativity may have implications for creative practitioners. However, it is also possible that the issues are not recognised by the practitioners themselves, or are regarded as irrelevant. This article therefore investigates the understanding of creativity which is taken up in creative practitioners' own talk, about themselves and their work. The next section presents the rationale for looking at this 'practitioner concept' and outlines the research approach which is adopted to investigate it.

### ***Researching Creativity as a Practitioner Concept***

The research presented in the following sections investigates how contemporary creative practitioners understand creativity. The interest is in creativity as a 'participant concept'. This is consistent with a discursive psychological focus on categories that 'participants themselves may treat as meaningful' (Edwards p.60) as part of their 'sense-making practices' (63). It is also consistent with the ethnographic distinction between 'etic' and 'emic' research (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). In these terms, creativity as the topic of academic research is an 'observer-identified' theme and category: it is not assumed to be identical to creativity as the concern of contemporary creative practitioners. The latter, 'emic' category can be studied through an examination of the 'terms, images and ideas that are current in [the participants'] culture' (p.194). In this article, the culture of interest is that of the (predominantly) Western and affluent national contexts (such as the US, the UK,

Europe, Australasia) in which creativity is currently widely celebrated. The research presented below does not attempt to discover or specify what 'is' creative. It investigates the meanings and associations that creativity carries for participants.

The research analyses transcribed talk from interviews. The narrative-discursive methodology (Taylor and Littleton 2006, 2012) was developed as part of the social psychology tradition of social constructionism (Gergen 1985), discourse analysis and critical discursive psychology (Wetherell 1998). In social constructionist terms, talk provides evidence of the 'human meaning systems' through which we understand the world and our experience (Gergen 1985: 270). The focus is not on individuals as members of groups or sub-groups, but on the meanings and associations which make up the shared knowledge they draw on in their accounts and sensemaking. This 'discursive backcloth' (Wetherell 2001) comprises both established understandings and ongoing contemporary discussion. Available 'discursive resources' shape participants' talk about themselves as creative practitioners, and the practice itself. There are parallels with Pierre Bourdieu's accounts of 'cultural messages' (Bourdieu and Eagleton 1992:200) and 'doxa' that constitute 'a space of possibles' and a 'repertory of actual and virtual possibilities'.

The multiple discursive resources around creativity and the creative are approached as a ragged, potentially contradictory accumulation. Unlike the relatively coherent theorising and communications of intellectual networks (e.g. Collins 2000), the research approach does not assume the logical coherence or regularity of meanings that might be implied by terms like 'system' or 'order'<sup>15</sup>. Available discursive resources may include more formal accounts, for instance from academia and policy, as well as the common sense understandings that Gerber refers to as 'contemporary imaginaries of traditional practice', such as 'the art-for-art's sake garret dweller' (81). Resources carry social and cultural values

and also emotional loading or affect derived from particular contexts of use. Some resources may acquire additional personal meanings for a speaker. For example, the elite status of 'high arts' like painting and classical music has class associations. These can be reinforced, or challenged, in the emotional experience of a particular member of society, impacting positively or negatively on the associations that art carries for that person (Taylor 2015b).

The research approach assumes that an 'active speaker' (Wetherell 1998) draws on the available resources to do 'discursive work'. (This is similar to Gerber's discussion of her participants' active use of 'narrative' resources.) As part of this discursive work, a speaker may confront and negotiate contradictions, or avoid them. Other discursive work may include the 'identity work' to construct and present an emergent self-in-the-making (Taylor 2015b), and 'rhetorical work' against potential challenges (Billig 1987). For instance, in the terms of this approach, resources taken up by the women artists discussed by Bain (2004) included the established and gendered images of both the artist in the studio, and the carer in the family home. The resources conflicted around the prioritising of, respectively, the work and the claims of family members. The conflict 'troubled' the artist's position in relation to the studio space, and potentially her practice and identity as an artist (see also Taylor (2011, Taylor and Paludan 2019). These examples illustrate the critical approach adopted in the research. The interest is ultimately in issues of power and inequality, including categorisations of people and practices that perpetuate privilege and exclusion.

## METHODS

The research participants are creative practitioners interviewed in a British small city in 2017. The project was conducted to coincide with commemorations for the city's 50<sup>th</sup>

anniversary. Participants were contacted through shared studio spaces and a further 'snowballing' process of recruitment. The final selection of 25 participants was a convenience sample. The project organisers conducted the interviews and passed them, with the participants' consent, to the author of this article for analysis. The following section presents findings from a narrative-discursive analysis of 24 interviews (18 women and 6 men, excluding one further interview which was conducted with a deaf male practitioner through a signer).

The practitioners engage in a wide range of creative practices, including painting, textile art, photography, jewellery making and ceramics. They identify with the arts. They accept the designation of 'maker artists' used in the original project invitation, and refer to themselves as artists during the interviews. They present their work in exhibitions and on personal websites. The majority work in public or charity-funded studios described as places for artists. They cite as influences artists with national and international reputations, locating themselves within larger artistic traditions and communities of practice, including through their earlier study at art college or other courses related to their practice.

However, the participants can also be seen as creative workers who are part of the CCI. They attempt to monetise their practice, selling directly and through art or craft fairs and online marketplaces. They also earn through regular teaching and occasional workshops. Most organise their practice like a business, working regular hours and marketing themselves online. However, few manage to support themselves completely through its earnings. Most rely on additional sources of financial support such as savings, pensions, the earnings of partners or income from other employment.

The participants' self-identifications are also potentially complicated by the locations in which they practice. Almost all maintain a separate working space, in communal studios



(the majority) or their own homes (for instance, a dedicated room or a shed). They therefore occupy the conventional space of the artist, the studio (Bain 2004). However, the city where they live has few associations with the arts. As a 'new town' built in the 1970s within commuting distance of London, it does not correspond to accepted images of an artists' environment. It lacks the history and cultural associations of similarly sized but older UK cities, like York or Oxford, or the vibrant urban identity of cities associated with both the arts and the CCI, like London. A recent local government campaign even referred to these absences in jokey advertisements, calling the city a 'concrete jungle', 'lacking culture'. The city location therefore potentially puts an identification with the arts in question, as if this is not a place for 'real' artists.

However, the participants' practice is not confined to immediate physical sites. They travel to meet other makers, within the UK and internationally, for instance, on residencies. Many belong to international online practitioner communities, and some exhibit in touring exhibitions which are curated online. They use YouTube for information about techniques and online market spaces, like Etsy, both to sell their own work and obtain equipment and supplies. They can therefore be seen to practise in complex interconnected spaces which facilitate identities related to both the conventional arts and the CCI.

The interviewers asked participants about their creative practice, the places associated with their making, their connections to other people, and possible future challenges to their practice. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The narrative-discursive analysis involved repeated close reading of the transcribed talk to identify patterns within and across interviews, in the references, language used, and associations of value and affect. The interest is in the recognisable, often banal connections given by use and common sense association rather than logic or rational argument. The

patterns are taken to correspond to shared understandings or resources, discussed here in terms of repertoires, defined as 'a relatively coherent way .... of talking about objects and events in the world' (Edley 2001:198). In the dataset a repertoire appears as words, images and references to value and feelings that recur in several interviews. It is often recognisable as a 'common sense' way of talking about a topic or issue. An example also noted in research in both the arts and the CCI is the participants' repeated references to people 'loving' what they do, sometimes with the additional claim that this distinguishes them from people doing ordinary work.

As with most qualitative research, the analysis involves too large a body of data to be published in full, and patterns occur in more instances than can be quoted. The following section presents extracts which illustrate patterns found across the dataset. A feature of the research approach is that participants are not introduced with pseudonyms or biographical information (Taylor 2012). This is to avoid a reading of an extract that connects it to an identity category, like an age group, as if, for example, the participant speaks (only) as its representative, voicing feelings or opinions shared by others in the same category. Participants are therefore identified by number (P1, P2). Interview dates are omitted, to assist anonymisation. Where relevant, there is also a term to describe their practice, based on their self-identification (such as textile artist). The talk has been minimally transcribed. It is not edited into standard written sentences, so retains irregularities like repetition and false starts. Some extracts have been edited for length: an ellipse (...) indicates that words are omitted.

## ANALYSIS

The extracts presented in this section are discussed in relation to three themes or issues which were also central to the academic conceptualisations: the basis of a creative identity or a claim to be creative; the nature of creative practice and the value of creative work.

### *Claiming a Creative Identity*

The participants construct and claim a creative identity in two patterns which correspond to repertoires noted in other research (Taylor and Littleton 2006, 2012). First, the participants refer to their childhood experience of creative activities, presenting an early interest, and sometimes the creativity of other members of their family, to support their claim to a creative identification.

EXTRACT 1 (P1) I was always really creative and I liked making things My Mum was always on the sewing machine making some soft toys because she was working in a nursery and she was always making soft toys for the children My father was really creative too

A second pattern is that the practitioner claims an early awareness of being different, because of their artistic interest or for other reasons.

EXTRACT 2 (P2) I seem to be the sort of black sheep in the family that has the sort of artistic bent

These retrospective accounts construct the speaker as exhibiting creativity and a (different) identity from an early age, implying continuity from the past to present as evidence of a creative identity. Such continuity is consistent with a conceptualisation in which:

'life follows the pattern of a story and unfolds from an origin, understood both as a point of departure and also as a first cause or, better, a generative principle, up till a final point which is also a goal.' (Bourdieu 1996: 187).

Bourdieu criticises the conceptualisation for exaggerating the coherence and unity of a life, as would critical discursive psychologists. However, this way of understanding creativity, as the 'generative principle' that defines and drives a biography, is well-established. It is an available resource for speakers' accounts of themselves as artists and creative practitioners. Constructing such a unity in their lives functions to warrant or justify their claim to be creative, and their pursuit of their practice.

For some participants who had attended art college but later put aside their practice, to teach or raise children, such a unity also confers a 'rightness' on their return to the practice, as a reclaiming of their original creative self. The unity can be invoked in brief references.

EXTRACT 3 (P3) Yeh I mean the kids are grown up now they've left home so my time is my time now

EXTRACT 4 (P4) now that I've retired I'm using my understanding of the medium to explore the things which I never had time to do before

Continuity is also constructed in time references, like 'always' (as in Extract 1). These emphasise the maker's long-term commitment to their practice, reasserting the identity and the vocation, creative capacity or 'artistic bent' as one of the participants refers to it.

EXTRACT 5 (P2) one thing about being an artist is I will always try different mediums different techniques in things because I want to stretch myself I don't want to stagnate

EXTRACT 6 (P5) Yes I'm always looking for new techniques and different styles different ways of working

### ***A Creative Practice***

The participants were invited to describe their practice. The details of course varied, because of the practitioners' different specialisms, but there was a strong pattern across the interviews that can be labelled a repertoire of innovation and experimentation. Referring positively to innovation, participants describe their attempts to achieve it, for instance, by modifying materials. For example, a milliner explained how she cuts and dyes feathers. Novelty is also achieved by seeking out new, different materials and equipment. Two ceramicists (in separate interviews) describe their use of glazes, and other techniques.

EXTRACT 7 (P6) I've been experimenting recently with different type of glazes and then planning to make my own glazes too The products I have now mainly with commercial glazes I've been using them by mixing them to give a unique colour too like this one you can see here

EXTRACT 8 (P7) I use like a hessian material that I roll the clay into or I use lace sometimes you know anything really that will Little combs as well like this one here actually yeah combs like that to create texture and a different finish on it A real range I'm always experimenting with different glazes you see all these ones here that I've got I one thing I haven't started to do yet is mix my own I tend to use ready made ones

Practitioners who source ready-made materials from a commercial supplier can construct innovation in accounts of how they engage with the potential uses.

EXTRACT 9 (P5) They tend to bring out a new glass every now and then... So I'd go onto the [online site] ... they've got a training section so I would look at what they recommend you can do with the glass and the firing temperatures and then look at what I can do with it and play with it

Participants also refer to innovation and experimentation with techniques. This is often presented as effortful, involving many different processes or even physical exertion. Participants also emphasise how they need to overcome difficulties, for instance in references to 'trial and error' (Extracts 11) and 'challenge' (Extract 12).

EXTRACT 10 (P8) (batik textile artist): most of the time I will paint the colours on and build up the design that way Over the last year or so I've been experimenting with bleach as well so when I've got a colour in I'll bleach some of it out and then wax over the top and really layer up the designs and make them a lot more detailed than I used to

EXTRACT 11 (P9) (metalworker): oh believe me it's a lot of trial and error Erm I see something like repousse which is where you actually beat some you beat an image out of copper I didn't know really much about it and I did I read a little book on it This was way before YouTube and I thought I'd give it a try So I made myself a sandbag and I started hitting and shaping it and I didn't realise that I'd developed my own technique which is not exactly unique but very different from how you're supposed to do it

EXTRACT 12 (P10) (woodturner): it was really a sort of challenge to myself to start because I got fed up with doing round things I started doing square things And oblong things And that is a bit more tricky technique wise

The participants therefore construct a recognisable (or, in Jerome Bruner's term, 'canonical', Bruner 1987) narrative, of creative practice as innovative and difficult. The process is future-focussed and open-ended. This can be contrasted, for example, with a possible construction of creative practice as the skilled reproduction of a classic technique.

### ***Creative Value***

The participants' references to creative value were less direct than their accounts of creative practice or claims to a creative identity. Part of Becker's myth of the artist is that the specialness of the creative maker and the work are inextricably linked: 'Works and makers stand in reciprocal relation to one another' (1982:357). The maker's identity therefore guarantees the kind of creative value referred to by Born (2010) and Banks (2017). This is obvious with the work of an acknowledged 'name', as in references to 'a Picasso'. The participants generally avoid such claims, perhaps out of modesty, constructing the value of their work less directly.

There is a pattern of references to the uniqueness that derives from the elaborate and experimental making practices already outlined; participants talked of the desirability of an object being different to a mass-produced commercial product.

EXTRACT 13 (P12): I like things to be individual bespoke I don't want to do mass production that look all the same

Another supposed source of value is from personal connections. This is indicated in a practitioner's account of someone else's work. The (other) practitioner had modified a piece of building material from a historic building near her home, collected nearly half a century before when she first came to live in the city.

EXTRACT 14 (P14): somebody an artist from here she's got a bit of slate from [area of the city] from when she first moved there in the 1970s when there was still a barn at [area of the city] And she'd saved it It happened to be about the size of A5 so she painted a bit of the map of [the city] on it So for personal history for her it was brilliant And people just were really inspired

Here, the maker's personal connections 'inspired' people and produced the 'special emotional experiences' (Becker 1982: 357) associated with the myth of the artist.

A variation on this repertoire of personal value is exemplified in Extracts 15 and 16. Here, the practitioners refer to a piece of creative work originating in a personal view or principle. This again corresponds to the 'reciprocal relation' noted by Becker (1982: 356). The repertoires also exemplify a pattern of a linear process, from this starting point to the final creative output, which resembles some psychological models (e.g. Botella 2018). According to some of the practitioners' accounts, there is an almost alchemical transformation of the personal into a work of creative value. For example, Extract 15, a textile artist describes how a work represents relationships in her life, colour-coded to indicate their different meanings to her ('soul significant', 'heart significant', 'mind significant').

EXTRACT 15 (P15) (textile artist): Now it's a bit complicated its a bit conceptual  
Basically what I've done is I've written down all the significant people in my life ... OK



so red is soul soul of significance...Then I have my sister who is orange because she's heart significant ...And some of the relationships that I've had they start off orange because they're heart significant and then they become soul significant for a while and then you break off and then they change to yellow and become mind significant because they're still there in your mind but they're not in your heart anymore they're not as strong

Other practitioners 'decoded' the finished work to explain the starting point. In Extract 16, the work is presented as having originated in a 'message' which the maker wanted to convey about miners' working lives.

EXTRACT 16 (P4) (photographer and sculptor): ...there was a tiny little figure ...and then I've added certain things to portray the idea of mining and clay work and that sort of thing which went on and the features have simply gone So the figure is now a form of cypher if you like for all people who were working under those situations

The repertoire of the personal corresponds to another aspects of the myth criticised by Becker, 'a particular, intensely individualistic theory of art and how it is made' (Becker 1982;353). The emphasis is on 'the maker's special qualities and worth' as the basis of art and therefore, by extension, on personal involvement as central to creative making.

The construction of creative value through the repertoire of the personal resolves the problem of valuing the work in monetary terms. Although these practitioners did attempt to sell their work, there was a strong pattern of references, even from those who make a living from their practice, to the impossibility of charging a price that reflects the effort of making.

EXTRACT 17 (P16): they don't appreciate the time it takes to make and you can't just charge for it

EXTRACT 18 (P6): you spend so much time on them and also there's a lot of effort putting into these pieces ...you can't sell them cheap ... [but] sometimes people are not willing to pay for that

Another strong pattern corresponds to Gerber's 'instrumental' accounts (Gerber 2017) and the claims in psychology and the CCI regarding the practical application or utility of the creative. Here, the term 'therapeutic' was often used, as in Extract 19 in which the practitioner is referring to workshops she runs. Similarly, in Extract 20 the practitioner refers to her work as 'healing'.

EXTRACT 19 (P17): Yes and it's really lovely when it helps people feel better And I did a project with [organisation name] a few years ago and one lady who was very ill with depression said that she couldn't do it and she got very upset And in the end after three weeks she started to make [a piece of work] and when she'd finished it ... the look on her face [laughs] and she was so happy about that piece and it makes it really worthwhile when you can actually share your gifts and let other people do amazing things

EXTRACT 20 (P18): I realise I have a concept behind (the works) I think And I feel the concept is kind of it's some kind of healing

This notion of therapeutic value also appears as beneficial for the practitioners themselves. One explained why he had taken up his practice alongside another occupation.

EXTRACT 21 (P6): there was always something missing in my life I think you know because I think I like what I'm doing working in [occupation] and it's convenient as well and you do get a decent salary and you get a good standard of living and other things But there was always something missing

Some accounts link the therapeutic function to the practice providing an escape.

EXTRACT 22 (P20) (stained glass artist): What I find is that when I'm making stained glass it doesn't matter what's happening in my life at that particular time Everything is just completely cut off because I'm so absorbed in what I'm doing that you know you have no worries everything just kind of disappears into the wind really so it's very very therapeutic

### DISCUSSION

The above analysis explored the patterns in the participants' constructions of their own identities, their creative practice, and the value of the practice and its outputs. These regularities or repertoires together constitute a practitioner concept of creativity. The practitioner concept does not correspond to any single academic conceptualisation and is itself not coherent or unified. The analysis shows some parallels with the different academic conceptualisations that have been reviewed, including the 'historical imaginaries' noted by Gerber (2017). The participants' discursive work to warrant or justify their practice is similar to the accounting for 'investment' discussed by Gerber. The participants present themselves as creative by constructing a unified creative identity that corresponds broadly to Becker's mythical artist. In addition, the emphasis on the personal starting point of making echoes the 'reciprocal relation' of 'works and makers' (356) noted by Becker as part of the myth.

The accounts of creative practice and value are consistent with the conceptualisations from psychology that have informed accounts of the CCI. In particular, value is constructed in terms of practical applications, most notably the therapeutic utility for both practitioners and audiences. None of the participants made overt claims about the quality of their work in terms of the kind of artistic or creative value discussed by Born (2010). They do claim to be special because of their interest in artistic and creative practices, supporting this claim with reference back to their childhoods in a pattern of discursive work noted by other researchers. In summary, the practitioners take up the 'special' associations of creativity with the elite artist but they also, in some contradiction, appear to accept the conceptualisation from psychology which has additionally been central to the development of the CCI, of creativity as a near-universal capacity that has practical applications.

Some of the participants' discursive work can be interpreted as responses to potential conflicts or challenges around their claims. A practitioner who has not received external recognition might attempt to justify their practice by referring to its applications. That point is difficult to evidence, although the interviews suggested that almost all the practitioners had achieved at least some positive reputation in their respective art worlds. They mentioned successes in competitions for grants, residencies and opportunities to exhibit, and a few regularly received substantial commissions.

Alternatively, some participants may justify or warrant their practice as rhetorical work against a potential challenge that follows from who they are, rather than the quality of their work. A majority are women and Bain (2004) has noted conflicts around reconciling an identity as a woman with that of an artist, because of the expectation that women will not prioritise an artistic or creative practice over the claims of other people (see also Taylor 2011, Taylor and Paludan 2019). Another potential challenge may arise for participants who

have previously followed other careers and do not have the advantage of youthful potential which has been associated with the CCI. Of course in the arts, age may be less of a disadvantage because there is an established narrative of a practitioner working unrecognised for a long period of before finally achieving success (Taylor and Littleton, 2012). Nevertheless, such a participant may need to justify their continuing effort, for example, to members of their family.

A further issue is that the image of the artist is classed. The elite associations of the arts have been linked to the individualism of creative work in the CCI, including, again, the prioritising of the work over responsibilities to other people which some workers have themselves described as 'selfish' (Taylor and Littleton 2012). These participants' claims to an appropriate class identity are potentially challengeable because in Bourdieu's terms, they lack 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu and Eagleton 1992: 116). In the complex hierarchy of British class categorisations, most participants do not identify, on the evidence of the interviews, with either conventional positions of privilege (variously referred to as upper class, upper middle class or even middle class), or with the 'working class' and/or ethnic identities which might be claimed as conferring 'authenticity'.

The unremarkable class positions of these participants are reinforced by their unremarkable residential location. There are places in the UK that have conventionally been associated with art and creativity, like the natural environments celebrated in the Romantic tradition, or old cities with beautiful traditional buildings, or cities noted for their art institutions and strong cultural communities. As has been noted, the practitioners' city conforms to none of these images. Some of the practitioners attempt to redefine it by emphasising the attractions of older areas that pre-existed the 'new town', or of the surrounding countryside and green spaces.

It is of course part of Becker's account that the collective processes of 'art worlds' do not produce meritocracies in which recognition and success follow directly from the quality or creative value of the work, and the special gifts of the mythical artist. Other theorists and researchers emphasise the uneven power relations that operate to advantage some practitioners and exclude others. Overall, these participants' claims to a creative identity are at best unsupported and more likely rendered precarious by their other identifications, including the identification with place invited in the original recruitment of the participants.

However, the analysis also indicates the possible promise that creative work carries for these practitioners. Critical research on the CCI suggests that the association of 'specialness' attracts young people into freelance work and the gig economy, making creativity 'a central device to turn workers from obedient Fordist 'hands' to just-in-time workers: transferable, entrepreneurial and individualistic' (Morgan and Nelligan 2018:148). These practitioners also construct claims to be special, even if not in terms of 'gifts' (an exception appears in Extract 19). Their talk does not correspond to the the 'normalising' of creativity in psychology and the CCI, even though they emphasise the applications of their practice. They do not appear to be attracted by the integration of work and life supposedly offered by the CCI, or the promise of an occupation that is freer and more fulfilling than conventional work. The repertoire of innovation and experimentation, and the associated narrative of creative practice as a future-focussed open-ended project are not applied to work and career possibilities.

For these practitioners, the promise of creativity is as a wider escape from ordinary life and its responsibilities, including past and present work. They do not claim the mythical artist's licence to 'violate rules'. They meet the claims of ordinary life, claiming therapeutic

benefit from only a temporary escape. Although some women refer to fitting the practice around family obligations, those obligations are (or were) still met. On the evidence, again, of their own accounts, it seems that these practitioners are responsible members of society. It is possible, however, that some rule violation occurs in the prioritising of self entailed in following the practice at all. Reckwitz (2017) has suggested that contemporary workers seek 'fascination and satisfaction' in a reaction against the modernist emphasis on rationality. For the practitioners discussed in this article, creative practice appears to hold a similar promise, but as a counter to the rationality of contemporary life more generally through a claiming or reclaiming of a creative self.

### **CONCLUSION**

Howard S. Becker (1982) suggested that artists and audiences share a common, 'mythical' image and understanding of the artist and, relatedly, the artistic capacity and the value of art. This article has argued that the contemporary celebration of creativity is not based on any common understanding or reference but rests on different conceptualisations and unacknowledged conflicts.

The research discussed in this article has analysed the talk of UK 'maker artists'. The research investigated what creativity means to the participants. It summarised their understanding as a 'practitioner concept', constructed from resources which are taken up in a speaker's ongoing discursive work. The participants cannot, of course, represent all the creative practitioners in contemporary Western culture. The resources are assumed to be shared but the participants' discursive work will in part be shaped by their own situations, as has been discussed.

The critical discursive research approach assumes that multiple resources around creativity circulate within the Western cultural contexts where creativity is currently celebrated. The approach does not assume that access to a discursive resource is confined to a bounded group or population. Rather, it is part of the knowledge or common sense shared across a broader cultural context. The approach does not claim to specify the origins of resources, as if tracing a line of influence. It is likely that some resources derive from the academic conceptualisations reviewed in the article. For instance, the influence of psychology on lay understandings has been noted by a number of theorists (e.g. Rose 1996), and CCI research has informed policy making, and study and training programmes. The research has not attempted to explore or confirm such lines of transmission.

By assuming a multiplicity of resources which are taken up in a speaker's ongoing discursive work, the analysis has remained open to the complexity and possible inconsistencies in the participant concept. Although the image of the artist associated with Becker's myth continues as an important resource for these practitioners' sense-making about themselves and their practice, the analysis shows additional resources in play. The elite associations of 'art for art's sake' (O'Connor 2010: 16) have been tempered by ideas like those developed in psychology and taken up in the CCI, such as that creativity can be cultivated, has utility and can to some extent be monetised, even if insufficiently.

The practitioner concept emphasises effort and complexity in a creative process, avoiding an evaluation in terms of artistic quality or value. This understanding of creativity of course makes the practice more accessible, because the requirement for following it is interest rather than a special talent. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, the most important association of creativity for these practitioners appears to be the specialness and difference that derive from a conventional elite notion of the arts and the artist, even if these are also



associated with other barriers, for instance, of class. The art associations of creativity carry a promise of transcendence and an escape from ordinary life, but also a potential challenge to the participants' own entitlement and claims to a creative status. The importance of these associations for the participants may be an indication of what is lacking in their experience of contemporary life more generally, summarised by Reckwitz (2017) as 'fascination and satisfaction'. It also indicates the continuing attraction of creative practice as something apart from that life.

The wider significance of the practitioner concept is that it draws attention to an 'anomaly' (Timmersman and Tavory, 2012) in creativity research. The anomaly is that 'creativity' continues to be widely discussed and celebrated without the reference of the term being clarified, beyond a fairly consistent but incomplete association with the elite arts. The article has shown, first, that a review of different academic uses indicates different and conflicting conceptualisations, and second, that the conceptualisation of creativity adopted by the practitioners is contradictory and also not consistent with any one of the academic conceptualisations.

Finally, the research raises the question of what remains to distinguish creativity and the creative if the elite art associations are removed. One possibility is that the practices that remain were previously encompassed by the broader category of 'work' (Taylor 2018). The research cannot confirm the rewards of creativity or show whether the ever-expanding range of CCI occupations do offer some additional experience of creative fulfilment. However, it suggests that for creative practitioners like those discussed, the promise of creativity is as something transcendent and apart, and therefore irreconcilable with whatever constitutes 'the ordinary' in a particular life and social context, including ordinary work. In relation to the CCI, if that promise is not met, this research may predict eventual

disillusionment with the trend of reframing many kinds of work as creative, although so far that disillusionment is not evident. More generally, the research raises the question of whether the contemporary celebration of the creative potentially risks devaluing work as a basic human activity, including the kind of promise previously associated with vocations, careers, professional achievement and job satisfaction.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> A systems approach is also strongly advocated by Beth A. Hennessy (2017).

<sup>2</sup> Examples include the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and, more recently, the Turner Contemporary art gallery in Margate, on the south coast of England.

<sup>3</sup> CCI researchers argue that creativity and its associated promises function to reconcile workers to low earnings, insecure employment and persistent inequalities, especially for women and BME workers (e.g. Conor et al 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Examples include Tanggaard (2012) which discusses a celebrated novel, Adarves-Yorno et al (2006) van Gogh and Martin Luther King which begins with references to van Gogh and Martin Luther King. The work of John-Steiner (2000) takes as examples of creative partnerships the collaborations between eminent artists or scientists or writers. Keith Sawyer (2003) developed a model for creative practice that is based on improvisations in music and theatre.

<sup>5</sup> Although Bourdieu refers to the 'cultural order' (185) and 'symbolic order' (206), he of course challenges notions of 'reduction' or 'unity' which such terms might carry.